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THE SITUATION ROOM

Joe Biden Campaigns in Michigan; COVID-19 Second Wave?; Trump Refuses to Condemn QAnon Conspiracy Group Labeled a Domestic Terror Threat by FBI; U.S. Investigating if Recently Published Emails are Tied to Russian Disinformation Effort Targeting Biden; Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) is Interviewed About Trump Warned Last Year That Giuliani Was Being Used to Feed Him Russian Misinformation. Aired 6-7p ET

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[18:00:21]

ANNOUNCER: This is CNN breaking news.

WOLF BLITZER, CNN HOST: We want to welcome our viewers here in the United States and around the world. I'm Wolf Blitzer in THE SITUATION ROOM.

We're following breaking news.

Tonight, there are new and very ominous indicators that the United States is now plunging into the second wave of the coronavirus pandemic. In addition to the rising death toll and case count, most states are now reporting alarming spikes in infections, 21 of them seeing all-time highs, as hospitalizations around the country are soaring.

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23,000 Americans may die by the end of election week.

The president watching all of this unfold right now.

Let's go to the White House first. We're watching this very closely over there.

CNN's Kaitlan Collins is joining us right now with the very latest.

What are you learning, Kaitlan?

KAITLAN COLLINS, CNN WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Well, Wolf, you're seeing the president wrap up his rally there in Florida.

He's headed to Georgia next. And he's bringing with him this message that he's been pushing for several weeks now, but is now doubling down on it, insisting that we are rounding the corner when it comes to the coronavirus pandemic, even though, as you noted, we're seeing cases surge to record highs in some states here in the United States. And we're also learning something that the White House has been

telling us for the last several months, that the president is tested every single day, is not true.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

COLLINS (voice-over): President Trump and Joe Biden battling in battleground states today one night after going head to head, but not face to face, in town halls.

DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: I didn't watch sleepy Joe last night. I just wanted to see what he looked like.

COLLINS: In Florida, Trump making his pitch to seniors as polls show Biden is leading nationwide with voters 65 and older.

TRUMP: Seniors will be the first in line for the vaccine. We are rounding the turn. I say that all the time. Some of the media doesn't like hearing it. But I say it all the time. We're rounding that turn.

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wearing during last night's town hall in Miami.

TRUMP: Hey, Dr. Fauci said don't wear a mask. Right?

SAVANNAH GUTHRIE, NBC NEWS HOST: At first, but then everybody agreed.

TRUMP: Oh, I don't know. Then he changed his mind. But then you have a report coming out two days ago that 85 percent of the people wearing masks catch it.

COLLINS: The CDC report Trump is referring to did not find that 85 percent of people who wore a mask got coronavirus. It wasn't even about masks and instead found that people who got COVID-19 were twice as likely to have reported eating at a restaurant than those who did not.

The president is sowing doubt about wearing a mask, even as former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who was recently released from intensive care after his coronavirus diagnosis, admitted he was wrong not to wear a mask at the White House.

CHRIS CHRISTIE (R), FORMER GOVERNOR OF NEW JERSEY: It was a mistake. I was led to believe that all the people that I was interacting with at the White House had been tested. And it gave you a false sense of security.

COLLINS: Trump told NBC News he's not tested on a daily basis, like staff claimed, and that he can't remember if he was tested before his debate with Joe Biden.

TRUMP: I don't know. I don't even remember. I test all the time. Again, the doctors do it. I don't ask them. I test all the time.

COLLINS: Last night, Trump quickly denounced white supremacy, but stepped on his own message when he danced around condemning the conspiracy group QAnon.

TRUMP: I know nothing about it. I do know they are very much against pedophilia. They fight it very hard, but I know nothing about it.

If you'd like me to...

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TRUMP: ... study the subject.

COLLINS: Trump was also pressed on why he retweeted an absurd conspiracy that Osama bin Laden's death was a hoax and President Obama and Joe Biden had SEAL Team Six killed, a baseless theory debunked by a Navy SEAL, who was there.

TRUMP: That was a retweet. That was an opinion of somebody...

GUTHRIE: But...

TRUMP: And that was a retweet. I will put it out there. People can decide for themselves. I don't take a position.

GUTHRIE: I don't get that, you're the president. You're not like, someone's crazy uncle who can just...

TRUMP: No, no. No, no.

GUTHRIE: ... retweet, whatever.

COLLINS: Joe Biden struck a more subdued tone during his own town hall, as he criticized the president and sidestepped questions about expanding the Supreme Court.

GEORGE STEPHANOPOULOS, ABC NEWS HOST: But don't voters have a right to know where you stand?

JOE BIDEN (D), PRESIDENTIAL NOMINEE: They do have a right to know where I stand. And they will have a right to know where I stand before they vote.

COLLINS: According to television ratings from the dueling town halls, more people watch Biden than the ratings-obsessed president, who went after NBC's Savannah Guthrie for her tough questioning.

TRUMP: It's a nice pleasurable evening, as I have somebody going totally crazy last night.

(LAUGHTER)

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(END VIDEOTAPE)

[18:05:03] COLLINS: And, Wolf, the president going after Savannah Guthrie there, as we are now learning something that his former chief of staff has said privately about him.

That's John Kelly, of course, who was here before the president's last Chief of Staff, Mick Mulvaney. But now CNN is reporting that John Kelly has privately told friends this about the president.

And, obviously, it's not flattering: "The depths of his dishonesty is just astounding to me, the dishonesty, the transactional nature of every relationship, though it's more pathetic than anything else."

John Kelly went on to say: "He is the most flawed person I have ever met in my life."

That's what John Kelly, who worked for the president for a little under two years as his top aide, is apparently telling people about what he thinks about the president privately -- Wolf.

BLITZER: Yes, it's pretty amazing stuff, indeed.

All right, Kaitlan Collins at the White House for us, thank you very much.

Let's check in with CNN's Brian Todd. He's also working this story for us.

Brian, today, it was confirmed, more than eight million confirmed coronavirus cases here in the United States over these past several months. That's more than any other country in the world.

BRIAN TODD, CNN CORRESPONDENT: Right, Wolf.

It's really just not going well anywhere on the country right now. Just a short time ago also, the president's own surgeon general, Dr. Jerome Adams, warned about the outbreak in Wisconsin, saying that Wisconsin has positivity rates of over 10 percent and that the state is -- quote -- "going in the wrong direction."

And this comes just one day before President Trump plans to hold a large rally in Janesville, Wisconsin. This is

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(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

TODD (voice-over): Hospital beds on the move in Albuquerque, New Mexico, with hospitals pushing capacity. Officials in New Mexico say many coronavirus patients there need to be transferred from one hospital to another throughout the state.

And, tonight, they're worried about having enough people to take care of them.

DR. DAVID SCRASE, NEW MEXICO HUMAN SERVICES SECRETARY: Our hospital leaders' greatest concern today is staffing up those beds. They point out that the health care work force that's been fighting valiantly against COVID in New Mexico, they're getting tired. There's some people who've stepped back.

TODD: Cases have spiked to such an extent in New Mexico that the governor is telling people flat out don't leave your home if you don't have to. The virus, she says, is winning.

GOV. MICHELLE LUJAN GRISHAM (D-NM): This is the most serious emergency that New Mexico has ever faced.

TODD: Wisconsin is also seeing horrific spikes. And officials say many new cases are tied directly to virus spreads in prisons and veterans homes, like the King facility in Waupaca County.

DIANE LYNCH, WISCONSIN DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS: There are 52 members currently in quarantine. And there are 25 staff members currently out of the work unit with positive COVID tests.

TODD: Wisconsin and New Mexico are two of 10 states that just reported their single highest day of new cases ever.

The numbers are daunting all the way around. The U.S. topped 60,000 new cases in a single day for the first time since August 14, 32 states today trending up in new cases. The U.S. just passed eight million total cases of this virus. And America's top experts are very worried about the months ahead.

DR. ANNE RIMOIN, UCLA EPIDEMIOLOGIST: As we move towards the winter, and the weather is getting

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moment in history.

TODD: Experts say, this year, even with so many Americans desperate for some kind of celebration, holidays will have to be scaled back to combat the virus.

The CDC has just issued new guidelines for how Americans can stay safe at Thanksgiving, among them, assess the infection rates in your community, consider postponing or canceling activities. Think about having outdoor dinners, weather permitting, or hosting virtual dinners.

And limit the number of people at any gathering. Mask-wearing and distancing are more important than ever, America's leading voice on infectious disease says. And he's becoming impatient with people who aren't doing those things.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES: So, if you think that by getting infected and saying -- pooh-poohing the prevention modalities, that you're living in a vacuum and you're not -- no, you're becoming part of the problem.

(END VIDEOTAPE) TODD: But Dr. Fauci emphasized that it is still not too late to turn the tide for what will happen with the virus this fall and winter, if Americans act responsibly, if state and local officials take the right public health measures, and he says you can do all this without shutting the country down.

We should also note, Wolf, we found out a short time ago Dr. Fauci is going to be among the first people to see the data, the critical data that's going to tell the country whether one of those coronavirus vaccines is safe.

He is going to be among the first top experts to look at that critical data in the weeks ahead.

BLITZER: Yes. Certainly, we trust Dr. Fauci and his team very, very seriously.

Brian Todd reporting for us, thank you very much.

I want to bring in our chief medical correspondent, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, for analysis.

[18:10:00]

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63,000 new infections here in the U.S. just yesterday.

The head of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Francis Collins, just told me in the last hour he expects the daily death toll to start rising as well.

Just how dangerous, Sanjay, are these high numbers that we're seeing explode right now?

DR. SANJAY GUPTA, CNN SENIOR MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT: Well, it's very concerning, Wolf.

Obviously, if you're starting off this sort of -- this wave going into the colder weather at this high a level of viral transmission, it's just a lot that you all of a sudden can build on. If you're starting at a lower level, it takes a while to get into that sort of exponential growth.

Starting at 50,000, 60,000 newly infected people a day, if they're each potentially spreading it to two or three, you can see how significant a number that can reach quickly.

Wolf, one of the big concerns is just hospitals, right? And these are the same conversations you and I were having back in March and April. Hospital bed capacity is something that hospitals, cities are looking at all over the country right now.

And, typically, around this time of year, it's around 60 percent or so full. If we can show the map here, but in many many states around the country, hospital occupancy is already quite high. So if you're already high and going into flu season, going into

coronavirus season or worsening coronavirus season, I should say, that's a concern, Wolf. I mean, that's why a lot of planning is going on in these communities now, to say what happens if we are starting to run out of space?

Wisconsin is building these tents, these field hospitals. It's dangerous, Wolf, and a lot of planning now going into place to try and avert some of these -- some of the more tragic problems here.

BLITZER: Because, as you know, the U.S. surgeon general today warned that Wisconsin clearly going in the wrong direction, the state's positivity rate nearly 23 percent.

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GUPTA: Well, let me just remind you why positivity rate is such an important thing to look at, so positivity rate of 23 percent. Out of 100 people that were tested, 23 came back positive.

What does that mean? Why is that so concerning? Well, that means that if you're getting that many coming back positive, that means you're missing a lot more people who aren't getting tested.

It's kind of like if you go fishing with the net. Put the net down, you grab a bunch of fish, you think, oh, I grabbed a bunch of fish, there must be a lot more fish down there. It's the same sort of thing with positivity rate.

So why is it dangerous, then, in a community that has high positivity rate? Well, you ask yourself, if you go out, what is the likelihood you're going to come in contact with someone who is carrying the virus? It's much higher if you have a positivity rate of over 20 percent, like we're seeing in Wisconsin.

So, you go to a rally, you're next to people, closely clustered, longer than 15 minutes. If people aren't masked, they're putting that virus into the air, outside safer than inside, but that's still a lot of virus within a rally or any kind of gathering like that. And that's the big concern.

So, even aside from anything else that's going on, in the middle of a pandemic, bringing large groups of people together is a bad idea, Wolf. It's been a bad idea for months now. We know this, and the numbers are even worse now than they were before.

BLITZER: Yes, even if it's outside, you should engage in social distancing and certainly wear a mask to protect yourself and protect everyone else.

Pfizer now says, Sanjay, that it will request an emergency use authorization for its potential coronavirus vaccine by the third week in November, if it gets positive data, no guarantee, but potentially the third week in November.

What hurdles does this vaccine need to pass?

GUPTA: You know, it's basically two hurdles. And I will preface by saying nobody knows what the data is, yet except for this independent entity known as the Data Monitoring Safety Board.

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effective, this vaccine, and if two months of safety data don't show significant adverse effects.

If it crosses those two hurdles -- and Pfizer, again, they haven't seen the data, but they anticipate by middle of November that the data will be there. And if it's positive, they're going to go ahead and apply for this emergency use authorization.

That's sort of been the plan all along. But I want to again emphasize, as promising as things have been, and I'm quite optimistic about it, as there are many people, we still haven't seen the data. We have got to see that this vaccine actually works and isn't having adverse effects.

BLITZER: Got to make sure it's effective, but also we got to make sure it's safe and the side effects are really, really minimal.

GUPTA: Yes.

BLITZER: All right, Sanjay, thank you very, very much, Dr. Sanjay Gupta, always joining us with his expertise.

Just ahead: Joe Biden now says President Trump is -- quote -- "living in a dream world" after repeatedly claiming the coronavirus is about to disappear.

[18:15:00]

And, later, we will have more on the president's refusal to condemn a dangerous conspiracy theory labeled a domestic terror threat by the FBI.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: Joe Biden is taking his presidential campaign to the battleground state of Michigan in a bid to rebuild what's called the blue wall President Trump's shattered back in 2016.

CNN's Jessica Dean is tracking the Biden campaign for us. She's joining us from Michigan right now.

So, Biden is going directly after the president, Jessica, in a very, very tough -- with tough words.

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health care and the Affordable Care Act really central to his closing argument here in Michigan.

[18:20:00]

He and his campaign believing that has a through line to so many issues, including Amy Coney Barrett's nomination to the Supreme Court, Republicans' efforts to dismantle the ACA, and then, of course, the coronavirus and Trump's response to the coronavirus.

Take a listen.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

BIDEN: He is still living in a dream world. He keeps telling us that this virus is going to disappear like a miracle. He said, I think, last night in his town hall -- I didn't have the pleasure of hearing it. I was doing one myself.

He said, we have turned the corner.

As my grandfather Finnegan might say were he here, he said, he has gone around the bend.

(LAUGHTER)

BIDEN: Turned the corner. My lord.

It's not disappearing. In fact, it's on the rise again. It's getting worse, as predicted. We all know the terrible price this nation has paid.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

DEAN: Meantime, at his town hall last night in Philadelphia, Joe Biden talking about a question he's dodged for weeks now. And that's whether he supports packing the Supreme Court.

He has said that he doesn't want to give that answer because it's a distraction. He said last night he promised to give his answer on that before Election Day.

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making sure people turn out to the polls.

We learned today, Wolf, that Vice President Biden's perhaps biggest surrogate out there, former President Barack Obama, will hit the campaign trail for him in Philadelphia next week.

BLITZER: Eighteen days to go until November 3, Election Day, but millions, more than 20 million Americans already have voted.

All right, Jessica, thank you very much.

Let's bring in our political correspondent, Abby Phillip, and CNN political commentator Bakari Sellers. He's the author of the new book "My Vanishing Country: A Memoir."

Abby, CNN has learned that the former White House chief of staff, retired General John Kelly, has told friends the President Trump, in his words, "is the most flawed person I have ever met in my life."

Given these very strong feelings, why won't the president's former chief of staff simply come out publicly to explain to the American people why he's so concerned about his former boss' character?

ABBY PHILLIP, CNN WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Yes, I think that is the question.

And it's one that really I don't have a great answer to. It's not clear to me why John Kelly, who does not have a good relationship with this president and hasn't for a very, very long time, why he won't just simply say publicly what he's saying privately.

The only thing that I can gather, from my understanding of how John Kelly is as a person from people who know him, is that he is kind of a circumspect person publicly. He doesn't want to get deeply involved in the political drama.

But, at the same time, he's obviously painting a very dire picture of this person that he used to work for. And I think it stands to reason that he -- if he felt so strongly about it in private, he ought to let the public know publicly, because he's one of the people, one of the few people who has been so close to this president, worked for him for many years.

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BLITZER: Yes, so many of the president's former advisers are saying similar things.

Bakari, we have also just learned that former President Obama will make his first campaign stop for Joe Biden next Wednesday in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania being a key battleground state.

This marks a long-awaited moment for the Biden campaign, doesn't it?

BAKARI SELLERS, CNN CONTRIBUTOR: It does, I mean, and I know that Joe Biden has to feel amazing to have his former boss out on the campaign trail.

Look, Barack Obama is the most popular politician in the entire country. He's the big dog. And so, when you roll him out, I mean, it's going to be energy abound for this campaign. It's going to be new wind beneath its sales, if it needs it.

Barack Obama is someone who's going to pitch a message, much like Joe Biden, of unifying this country, of bringing this country together, whether or not you're in North Carolina, or whether or not you're in Ohio or Pennsylvania. He's someone, a lot like John Kelly knows Donald Trump, Barack Obama knows Joe Biden, and he will be able to speak to his character, he will be able to speak to his fortitude and who he is.

And he will also be able to talk about a vision for this country moving forward. I'm so excited about having Barack Obama on the trail. The Republican Party doesn't have anything like it.

I mean, Larry Hogan had to vote for Ronald Reagan today.

BLITZER: Yes, the governor of Maryland. And he made a point by saying he was voting for Ronald Reagan, a symbolic statement, indeed.

And we do know that President Obama has a huge following out there to get out the vote, which will be so, so critical in this election.

Abby, only 18 days to go. We're seeing a president very much on the defensive right now. What do the locations of President Trump's campaign stops reveal to you about how his team is viewing this race with only a few days left?

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PHILLIP: Well, I think probably the only thing that you need to know about how the president's team is viewing this race is where he is tonight, where he's heading right as we speak, Macon, Georgia.

He's going to Georgia to try to defend that state that he won the last time around. That should be a state that he should be able to win this time around if he were in a strong position.

He was also campaigning in North Carolina, another state. He should be able to at least, if he were in a strong position, he -- as a Republican, he ought to be able to win that state pretty easily without investing resources in the last 20 days.

This is a president who is defending a map and a very narrow path to victory. And that narrow path may very well require that he wins North Carolina. It will also require that he wins Florida, which is a state that he's been campaigning in recently as well.

And so the Trump campaign, despite what the president is saying, knows that this is a map that is not trending in their direction. They're not in the position to expand the map. They are only trying to defend what they did last time around.

And I think that defensive territory is actually a much broader territory than they would like it to be at this point.

BLITZER: Very important, indeed.

All right, Abby Phillip and Bakari Sellers, guys, thanks very much.

An important and quick programming note for our viewers: Tune in this weekend for an inside look at the Trump presidency from those who worked for the president, Jake Tapper, a CNN special report, "The Insiders: A Warning From Former Trump Officials." That will air Sunday 9:00 p.m. and midnight, 9:00 p.m. and midnight Eastern, right here on CNN, right after our special edition of THE SITUATION ROOM.

Just ahead, we will have more on President Trump's embrace of yet another dangerous conspiracy group, QAnon, which the FBI calls a domestic terror threat. And, later, Congressman Adam Schiff is standing by to join me live

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We will be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[18:30:00]

BLITZER: Anti-extremist organizations are sounding the alarm after President Trump refused to condemn QAnon, a conspiracy group that's been labeled a domestic terror threat by the FBI.

Let's continue the discussion with the CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, Jonathan Greenblatt. Jonathan, thanks so much for joining us.

Let me remind you and our viewers what the president said about this dangerous group last night. Watch this.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

TRUMP: I know nothing about QAnon. I know very little.

GUTHRIE: I just told you.

TRUMP: You told me, but what you told me doesn't necessarily make it fact, I hate to say that. I know nothing about it. I do know they are very much against pedophilia. They fight it very hard. But I know nothing about it.

REPORTER: They believe it is a satanic cult run by the DNC.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

BLITZER: He's clearly not condemning this conspiracy theory. The president of the United States actually encouraging a totally insane movement out there as he pour -- pouring fuel on the fire, Jonathan.

JONATHAN GREENBLATT, CEO, ANTI-DEFAMATION LEAGUE: Yes. You know, Wolf, as I said last night, as soon as I saw that, it is shockingly irresponsible that President Trump refused to disavow QAnon, which, as you

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And, look, the most generous thing I can say here tonight is that claiming ignorance is just absolutely unacceptable. When you're the president of the United States, you just can't credibly say, I don't know who David Duke is or I don't know who the Proud Boys or I don't know what QAnon is, particularly when the president is on record is saying he watches cable television news all the time. I mean, obviously, he knows exactly who these people are, Wolf.

And if you're not willing to call out a domestic terror threat, a group that wants to cause violence to the home land I mean, that's a dereliction of duty at best.

BLITZER: Yes. The other day, he said the -- he said this. He said, well I don't know much about the movement other than I understand they like me very much, which I appreciate. So he knows at least that much, and it's pretty shocking that he simply can't condemn this organization. Tell us why they're so dangerous.

GREENBLATT: Well, look, QAnon started in about 2017 on a service called 4chan. And, again, it is a sort of a shadowy conspiracy movement. I think their followers are probably in the tens of thousands. But they believe there is a deep state conspiracy, again, run by cabal of pedophiles. And their lunatic rantings have sort of move from the sewers of the internet, Wolf, into mainstream politics, in large part because of moments last night.

You know, at the ADL, we track extremists. And I can tell you, on QAnon boards today, we watch them. And these extremists believe last night was a huge win. They think it was a win because simply being discussed on a platform like, you know, a broadcast news program, to them, feels like a victory.

And when President Trump claims he doesn't know what they are but actually states what they believes as their core purpose, fighting imaginary satanic pedophiles, they think he is code -- you showing them code.

[18:35:05]

He is approving of them. And that's why they feel emboldened today.

And, look, like I said a moment ago, whether it was a QAnon enthusiast trying to attack a pizza parlor in D.C. or other acts of violence, these people are dangerous and they don't deserve to be dignified by the president of the United States or anyone in public life.

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concern?

GREENBLATT: Again and again. We've spoken to people at the highest levels of government publicly and privately to explain that in order to eliminate this kind of threat, you've got to denounce it clearly and cogently.

But I must say, I mean, I've never had a moment like this before that I have seen in public life. There are plenty of responsible politicians on both sides of the aisle. But when the president himself signals that this is somehow normal, that it's just simply a group he's not aware of, I've got to say it sends them a signal. They feel emboldened by this.

They already think, Wolf, that the president is re-tweeting their memes, right? And a lot -- and suggesting there somehow normal, it is giving them the entree they are looking for into American public life.

BLITZER: All right, Jonathan thanks very much. Jonathan Greenblatt of the ADL, I appreciate you joining us. We're going to stay on top of this story for our viewers.

Just ahead, I'll speak live with Congressman Adam Schiff about a new probe into a potential Russian disinformation campaign targeting Joe Biden and his son, Hunter.

Plus, multiple states are now reporting a huge surge in early voting. Will 2020 set a record for turnout? We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[18:40:00]

BLITZER: Federal authorities, including the FBI, are investigating whether recently published emails that purport to deal -- to detail, I should say, the business dealings of Joe Biden's son, Hunter, are connected to an ongoing Russian disinformation effort targeting the Biden campaign in the days leading up to the election.

Let's discuss with the Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, Congressman Adam Schiff. Congressman, thanks so much for joining us.

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REP. ADAM SCHIFF (D-CA): Well, we know that this whole smear on Joe Biden comes from the Kremlin. That's been clear for well over a year now that they've been pushing this false narrative about the vice president and his son.

And, you know, the idea that the president, that the White House Counsel and others were made aware that Giuliani was being used by Russian intelligence and using Russian intelligence in the sense of meeting with an agent of the Kremlin and pushing out this Kremlin false narrative, the idea that they were knowing and still on the floor of the Senate during the impeachment trial, pushing this Kremlin narrative is pretty breathtaking.

But I guess at this point we can't be shocked by anything this administration does, no matter how craven. But, clearly, the origins of this whole smear are from the Kremlin, and the president is only too happy to have Kremlin help and try to amplify it.

BLITZER: It's not like Rudy Giuliani is peddling this information in a vacuum, Congressman. Take a look at this picture of the president in the Oval Office holding up a copy of the New York Post touting this conspiracy theory. It's made its way all the way to the commander in chief with a big smile on his face.

SCHIFF: Yes. Well, look, I think we know who the driving force behind this smear has been all along and it's been the president and the Kremlin. The Kremlin has an obvious interest in denigrating Joe Biden. They want Donald Trump to win.

They recognize he's a weak president. He's been utterly unwilling to stand up to Putin and other autocrats. He has diminished NATO. He has criticized and weakened our alliance with our transatlantic partners. He's been the gift that doesn't stop giving for the Kremlin. So, clearly, they want to help him. So they want to denigrate the vice president. The Intelligence Community has made that abundantly clear.

And this particular smear though has also been acknowledged to come from the Kremlin, and there it is from the Oval Office, another wonderful propaganda coup from Vladimir Putin, seeing the president of the United States holding up a newspaper promoting Kremlin propaganda. It's really incredible.

BLITZER: The Washington Post, as you saw, is reporting that when the president was actually warned of concern about Giuliani, where he was getting all this information, warned by U.S. intelligence, law enforcement

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SCHIFF: Well, it's a big part of the problem. And we know for a long time, look, Rudy Giuliani doesn't, you know run the president, the president runs Rudy Giuliani. Giuliani is doing the president's bidding. He was doing the president's bidding late last year and earlier this year in Ukraine.

[18:45:02]

He was doing the president's bidding when he was pushing out this smear and trying to get the Ukrainians to push out this smear of his opponent because he was deathly afraid of being exactly where we are right now, which is less than three weeks from the election, losing badly to Joe Biden.

But the fact that he would continue to do it, I guess at this point shouldn't surprise us. But this is the story of Donald Trump -- utter unwillingness to stand up to the Kremlin, willingness to use their help no matter how dishonest or disreputable, a willingness to undermine our own elections by getting Kremlin help and amplifying it. And there's only one remedy at this point and that's to vote him out.

BLITZER: Have you, as a member of the Gang of Eight, the top leadership in the Congress, the Senate, and the House, and members of the Intelligence Committee, have you been formally briefed on what the Russians are up to right now in trying to peddle this kind of information?

SCHIFF: Well, I was in the Intelligence Committee today to see what the latest was, and frankly, we haven't gotten much from the intelligence community very recently, which concerns me. They have at times, some of the leadership, like Director Ratcliffe, not been very forthcoming in terms of the intelligence on the Russian threat and been promoting this false equivalence with other countries.

So, you know, I wish I could tell you more, Wolf. I wish the intelligence community was able to tell the public more.

But we do know this: the Russians are once again actively involved in trying to denigrate the vice president, Donald Trump is helping them, and we know that they are amplifying the president's misinformation about absentee ballots.

This is another gift the president is giving the Russians. Unlike 2016 when the Russians had to make up this stuff,

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fair election. The Kremlin just has to push out that false narrative by the president of the United States.

BLITZER: Congressman Adam Schiff, thank you so much for joining us.

SCHIFF: Thank you, Wolf.

BLITZER: All right. Just ahead, more than 20 million general election ballots have already been cast here in the United States as more states report record increases in early voting.

We'll be right back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

[18:52:10]

BLITZER: With just 18 days to go until the election here in the United States, states across the country are seeing huge turnout for early voting. And we're learning more about how many Americans have already cast their ballots

CNN's senior White House correspondent Pamela Brown is tracking all of this for us.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I see it as probably being one of the most important elections in my lifetime going forward.

PAMELA BROWN, CNN SENIOR WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT (voice-over): And it seems she's not alone. Not by a long shot.

More than 20 million Americans have already voted according to data from 45 states and Washington, D.C. analyzed by CNN, Edison, and Catalyst.

In North Carolina, these long lines on the first day of early voting Thursday were the first indicator of huge turnout in the Tar Heel State. The state board of elections is tweeting that more than 330,000 voters cast ballots on day

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In Georgia, they've seen a 62 percent increase in early, in-person voters compared to the same time four years ago. A similar story in Tennessee, where early voting in person or by mail started yesterday. And they've already seen a 91 percent increase compared to 2016. UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I think more of the millennial and younger are a

little bit more aware and maybe are more wanting to get out there and more aware of the issues.

BROWN: In Pennsylvania, the secretary of state says she expects that full results from mail-in ballots won't be available until the Friday after Election Day.

KATHY BOOCKVAR, PENNSYLVANIA SECRETARY OF STATE: Sometimes you might have an omission or an illegible postmark, received three days later, they can be counted.

BROWN: And in Michigan today, the secretary of state there announcing that people can't carry guns on election day at polling places, saying in a statement she's, quote, committed to ensuring all eligible Michigan citizens can freely exercise their fundamental right to vote without fear of threats, intimidation, or harassment."

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: I don't feel he's been treated fairly by the Democrats at all.

BROWN: In Florida, the edge Democrats have in voter registration is narrowing. New data from the state shows about 134,000 more Democrats are registered to vote than Republicans, which is down from 2016, when they led by about 327,000.

And in California --

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: You know what? It's not -- you can't just trust anybody right now.

BROWN: That frustration, part of a week-long drop box drama, which today appears to have been ended. The secretary of state announcing this afternoon the California Republican Party agreed to no longer deploy these unofficial ballot drop boxes, which were found in at least four counties.

[18:55:03]

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ARNOLD SCHWARZENEGGER (R), FORMER CALIFORNIA GOVERNOR: It's a stupid thing they're doing right now with these ballot boxes.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

BROWN: And, Wolf, in Florida, election officials are taking steps to remove ex-felons who owe court debts from the voter rolls. Of course, this comes after a Democratic led effort to raise millions of dollars to pay off those -- that debt that the court debt to those ex-felons can vote after a ruling earlier this year. But now, we're learning election officials are taking steps to remove those ex-felons who owe debt from the voter rolls.

BLITZER: All right. Pamela Brown, thank you very much.

And we'll have more news right after this.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

BLITZER: I'll be back for a special edition of THE SITUATION ROOM tomorrow, 6:00 p.m. Eastern.

Until then, thanks for watching.

"ERIN BURNETT OUTFRONT" starts right now.

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